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Gender and an All-Girls Book Club: Navigating Conversation Centered on Gender with Fifth Grade Girls

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GENDER WITH FIFTH GRADE GIRLS

by

Anna Haller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Education

Renita Schmidt
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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
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Abstract

Today is a dynamic time for women and gender in general. More terminology and gender labels are introduced to society, popular culture has a larger representation of transgender and female leads, and in general differences are more visible to children. As educators, we must prepare to address conversations of gender and gender expression in the classroom. The data collected comes from a year of collaboration with the Strong Girls Read Strong Books book club, a qualitative research study created by Dr. Renita Schmidt and Dr. Amanda Haertling Thein. The Strong Girls group meets at a local elementary school on Friday afternoons. The larger group fourth, fifth, and sixth grade girls are split into small groups by grade level and are supervised by a University of Iowa undergraduate or Dr. Schmidt or Dr. Haertling Thein themselves. My group was four fifth grade girls whom I had worked with for a year. The book club read three different texts between six sessions with each session lasting two hours. The girls are constantly asked to reflect upon their gender and meaning of what a strong girl is. This study explored how the girls saw their own gender and reacted to males being brought into the all-female space. The results of the study suggest that students are aware of not only their gender but know how to interact with people who do not share the same gender identity as them. They recognize a binary between girls and boys but also recognize that not all girls and boys are the same, looking beyond just the texts to understand how gender worked in their everyday lives.

Introduction

In Strong Girls Read Strong Books book club, a club aimed to help fourth to sixth grade girls explore what it means to be a strong girl while reading books with female protagonists, one of my students made a comment I will not forget. We were reading *The Higher Power of Lucky*, by Susan Patron. Lucky is a ten-year-old girl who lives in a California desert, trying to navigate a world where she believes she is alone with her guardian who she thinks may be leaving her. While this book is set in the desert, the girls reading this book live in Iowa and do not have a grasp of what living in a California desert might entail. One girl, Layla (pseudonyms are used for all minor participants), turned to me while we were discussing the desert and said, “I never want to go back there.” Layla is an African refugee from Sudan. While other girls were analyzing pictures of the desert, Layla’s mind appeared to be elsewhere. Sudan is a desertous country and Layla’s memory of it was vivid. With an increasing number of refugees coming into the American school system, it is no surprise that the diverse children we teach bring new thinking to texts we offer for reading. As educators, we must consider new ideas about how students will transact with texts and respond to literature.

I wanted to join this research project because I wanted to get involved in the Iowa City school system. I believe that if you want to make a connection with your students, you must be involved in the community. I also value literature, especially in elementary aged children, so I knew I wanted to be a part in some literary development for younger girls, even though I am looking to go into secondary education. I am a Caucasian female from a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. I have always been a proficient reader as my parents constantly filled our house with books. I have family and ancestry in Europe. I study at the University of Iowa and hope to teach social studies in a high school when I finish my degree. I enjoyed observing the girls instead

rather than always leading but sometimes I will read pages with them, letting them lead the conversation either by asking questions or responding to a question I asked. I enjoyed letting the girls express themselves through acting, writing, or self-reflecting while trying to keep the club as child centered as possible.

My research questions for this study were:

- What stories does a secondary social studies pre-service teacher tell about working in an elementary after-school book club?
- How does a secondary social studies pre-service teacher get to know elementary girls in an after-school book club?
- How do elementary girls talk about gender in an after school all girls book club?

Literature Review

Kidwatching

Kidwatching (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) started in the “1970s and 80s and served to popularize the concept by giving it definition and helping teachers and researchers learn to use it to structure and enhance their work” (p xi). Kidwatching is a combination of state of mind, collecting information, and reflecting on the data. At Strong Girls, I have the girls do most of the reading while I watch how they attempt to pronounce words, their reaction to how the story is progressing, and how group members interact with each other regarding the text. Along with kidwatching comes the responsibility to “document what children know, as well as their ways of constructing and expressing knowledge” (p 8). In Strong Girls, I record their conversations, make notes in my personal notebook, and record my own reflection on what I observed at the sessions. Researchers create a collection of notes, even when the child is not interested in

something, to acknowledge students' attitudes and behaviors to whatever text happens to be in front of them. Kidwatching allows teachers and educational researchers to see children's identities come to life. The way a child interacts with a text is guided by their identity, which is influenced by "language, culture, race, class, gender, family values, patterns of domestic organization, and political, social, and religious ideology" (p 18). In an all-girls book club, gender is a prominent identity with every strong female protagonist in the book. Looking at themselves as strong girls or analyzing the female characters, we encourage fifth grade girls to reflect on their gender identities.

Racial Analysis

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) speaks about the negative effects of colorblindness (p 35). By putting on a colorblindness lens, teachers experience "dysconscious racism" (p 35). This type of racism "justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p 35). Teachers, and others who work with students, do not typically challenge the status quo. In Strong Girls, we provide opportunities to girls of all races to gain skills previously reserved for those who came from well equipped backgrounds. Today, any student in fourth through sixth grade has the opportunity to participate in the book club to better their reading skills, discuss tough topics, and interact with other students who they may not see every day.

Gender Analysis

In *Gender Trouble* Butler (1990) analyzed the concept of gender and its relationship with biological sex. At Strong Girls, the protagonist of every book is female or identifies as females. The girls we work with are asked to reflect on their individual understanding of gender and how they identify themselves as a strong girl. Butler addresses the main controversy around gender: that is, it fixed and determined within a culture or that there is individually agency to determine

gender (p. 11). With these two schools of thought, Butler recognizes that there is only analysis within “the hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (p. 12). There are endless gender possibilities, but in terms of analysis there is a limit (p. 12). In *Strong Girls*, we do not stress any specific definition of ‘girl’ but rather ask the girls how they would define a girl. Butler further her argument by saying “gender can be understood as a signification that an (already) sexually differentiated body assumes, but even then, that signification exists only in relation to another, opposing signification” (p 13). When looking at gender, there is a binary that dominates: men and women. In *Strong Girls*, the conversation is dominated by talk of girls in women. This study introduces how the girls responded to their identity as strong girls when males were brought into their all-female space through the text they were reading. Books involving love interests and the girls mistaking a female character as a male character brought new topics around gender to our small groups that would not have been possible without both genders present in group conversation. While reflecting on their gender in their everyday lives and at *Strong Girls*, we also look at how the girls use their identities to interpret the texts we have them read.

Female Power

Bronwyn Davies (1989) investigates how children respond in this gendered world. Davies addresses the “division of the world into female and male” that is prevalent in children’s stories (p 43). While Davies focuses on preschoolers, this division is seen throughout many children’s books targeted to fourth through sixth graders. I will show this by looking specifically at the Amelia books that my group of strong girls read, one focusing on how Amelia navigated a crush on a boy. Davies explains that stories can be used by children to interpret the social surroundings around them. This will be explored while looking at how the girls in my group read

through the chosen texts. The main characters in the books that we read in our Strong Girls sessions were close in age to the girls I will be focusing on in this paper.

Transaction

Rosenblatt (1995) is a seminal personal response theorist who discussed the way readers interact with texts. This is important in Strong Girls as we do not only read books, but we have conversations about how we perceive what is going on in the book, how what we are reading affects our preconceived notions of being a strong girl, and the ways we connect events in the book to our everyday lives. Rosenblatt defined transaction as a process where “elements are aspects or phases of a total situation” (p. 26). This means that the reader and text work together, the reader does not just read the text and leave it at that. Rosenblatt elaborated by stating that “any literary work gains its significance from the way in which minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text” (p. 28). We saw this in Strong Girls Book Club every week. Each one of the girls had a different response or reaction to the text based on each girl; no two girls shared the exact same opinions while reading the texts. Along with transactions with the texts, we encouraged the girls to understand what they were reading and to go beyond the text by either expressing themselves through writing or acting. Rosenblatt defined both these types of reading. Efferent reading is “primarily focused on selecting out and analytically abstracting the information or ideas or directions for action that will remain when reading is over” (p. 32). In Strong Girls, we did this by summarizing what we read from week to week and sometimes sharing out the texts we read with the whole program. A lot of the artifacts I collected came through aesthetic reading. Aesthetic reading is “liv[ing] through what is being created during the reading” (p. 33). Reading aesthetically requires readers to address the “mixtures of sensations, feelings, images, and ideas [that have] structured the experience that

constitutes the story or poem or play” (p. 33). In my small group at Strong Girls, this was asking the girls to come up with their own book reviews, self-portraits and stories responding or inspired by the text at the time. This was the basis of my research.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Spring and Fall 2017 at the Strong Girls Read Strong Books book club that met Friday afternoons during each semester. Each Friday afternoon, we would spend two hours with the girls at an Iowa City elementary school. To prepare for these sessions, Dr. Renita Schmidt, Dr. Haertling Thein, and a group of pre-service teachers met every Monday afternoon to talk about Friday afternoons and prepare for the coming session. We discussed how to prepare to talk about the chosen book with the girls, what questions might come up, and how to best support our groups in terms of reading, social interactions, and writing about the books. The club began with a large group introduction, typically with a book or message shared with everyone before the girls split into grade levels. Then within grade levels, the girls were separated into smaller groups to create a better relationship between the undergraduate student and the girls participating in the book club. Over the course of the semesters, I worked with four girls named Sima, Kristen, Layla, and Kelsie. The girls read *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron, *Me and Rolly Maloo* by Janet Wong, *Amelia’s Boy Survival Guide* by Marissa Moss, and *Amelia’s BFF* by Marissa Moss during this period.

The Higher Power of Lucky is about a girl named Lucky who lost her mother at a very young age. Lucky lived with her guardian, but when she discovered that her guardian might be leaving her, she shut down. Even though she had many friends in her small California town of Hard Pan, she ran away in frustration. Lucky eventually came to realize that her guardian and friends would always be by her side. *Me and Rolly Maloo* (Wong, 2010) is a novel/graphic novel

hybrid that follows the story of Jenna Lee, a smart yet not popular fourth grader who is taken advantage of by the more popular girls, Rolly Maloo and her friend Patty. Patty and Rolly made Jenna give them answers to a district math test, but the teacher, with the help of Jenna's friend, brought justice to the fourth-grade classroom. *Amelia's Boy Survival Guide* (Moss, 2012) is a graphic novel written in the first person view of Amelia, who is navigating her first crush in eighth grade. Amelia, with her best friend Carly, discuss crushes, the dance, and realize that they do not need boys to have a good time. Amelia even puts one of her classmates needs above her own when they have a crush on the same boy. *Amelia's BFF* (Moss, 2005) features Amelia again, but this time she had to handle two best friends at the same time. Her best friend Nadia, from Oregon, comes to visit Amelia and does not get along with Amelia's best friend at home. Amelia takes advice from many people, including her older sister Cleo, to decide who to work with in the school baking competition and how to keep her two best friends, instead of losing them both.

Data for this study included video and audio recordings, notebooks and writing artifacts created by the students, field notes I created, and the literature that was read by the group. The data was collected and analyzed by reading and listening to the data recursively and finding patterns related to the research question.

Description of Participants

I worked with the four girls in my group during my research. Each girl was unique and brought a different perspective to each book we read. Next, I will describe the girls I worked with: Sima, Kristen, Layla, and Kelsie.

Sima reminded me of myself when I was a fifth grader in terms of her personality. She had olive skin, wavy brown hair, and brown eyes framed with glasses. She was the most avid

reader out of the four girls. She was confident in her reading ability, and yet often read quietly and sometimes ahead while others read out loud more slowly. I saw her turning the pages of a book when she was really interested in a book to keep the story going. She was very smart and proud of that fact. She was social and the prime example of a good reader by many of the girls in her grade. Sima loved reading and sometimes had read our books before we introduced them in the book club, leading me to assume that her parents are supportive of her reading. Sima was close friends with Kristen and Layla.

Kristen was a girl who sometimes struggled with longer words, but always attempted to sound them out. Kristen stayed engaged with the reading no matter what difficult words popped up. She was a Caucasian female who only missed one week of Strong Girls according to my data. There were some days when the group was off task and when I tried to ask questions to get the girls back on task, and Kristen was usually the first one to fall in line and try to get the other girls to focus. She was reserved, and always tried to read. She turned to Sima a lot for help, but when Sima was not at the sessions, Kristen asked others to help her with certain words. Sima brought Kristen to the book club, but I believe Kristen came back every week for her own interest in literature. Kristen really liked to listen to the books and sometimes struggled to write when I asked her. She also helped Layla when Sima was not there.

Layla was a refugee from Sudan, and is one of the inspirations for this research. She was Muslim and wore a hijab that complimented her dark skin. She became excited when she was in a group with her friends, specifically Kristen and Sima. Based off the Burke's Reading Inventory completed every term, Layla either wrote down Sima or Kristen or both as people who she looked up to as good readers, or referenced them in other questions. Layla had some trouble with decoding, yet always tried to sound out as many words as possible. When we were reading *Me*

and Rolly Maloo, she kept calling Rolly ‘Roll-y’ instead of ‘Ro-lly’. She would try to say Rolly’s name multiple times, but then forget how she would say it the next time she would have to say Rolly’s name. She sometimes liked to change names of characters when she had certain emotions towards a character or did not like to say their name, but still enjoyed the story overall. For instance, after struggling with Rolly’s name, she wanted to call her Tiffany instead. Layla really looked up to Sima as a reader. Sometimes when they were reading together, I could hear Sima and Layla getting off track to talk about something that happened in school, or I heard Sima helping Layla when Layla was struggling. In my opinion, Layla really enjoyed spending time with her friends who were in different classes than her, instead of just being there to read or write. When Sima or Kristen were not there, Layla did not seem as engaged or interested in the reading.

Kelsie was a bubbly Filipino-American girl who was a fluent reader and loved to help others by correcting their words while reading. She loved to talk about the Philippines, a place where many of her family members still live. She moved around a lot, liked to get through the book quickly as if the story was not unfolding fast enough. She was not afraid to interrupt the reading to ask a question or make sure that everyone is on the same page. She was not as close to the other three girls as they were to one another, but she was friendly with every person in the group. In terms of all the girls in the group, she was the fastest to talk about her life outside of the book club.

Data Collection and Analysis

With each book, the girls and I read, I asked them to do a different task. Below are the tasks and results with them. I made sure to tell each girl that they were not required to do the task, as I did not want to create a space that was completely like a classroom, but it would be

more fun to try different ways to interact with the books. The final task I asked the girls to complete was writing something that happened in their lives in a similar style to the Amelia books. This meant I wanted to see a combination of writing and drawing in their notebooks. It would have been unrealistic for me to ask the girls to do this if I did not do an example of the writing myself. Below is a sequence of tasks before this ‘final project’, looking at what activity we did with each book and seeing artifacts the girls created.

In Strong Girls, we read books that focused on female protagonists, female antagonists, and even smaller female roles. The idea of boys being in our space is not one acknowledged. As you can see below, our Strong Girls rap even has a line about boys not being in our space. However, each of the books we have read this semester either has a male character or the girls believe one of the characters to be male based on the actions the person takes. This has translated into the girls thinking about boys in their writing and drawing in response to the books.

Me and Rolly Maloo

For *Me and Rolly Maloo* (Wong, 2010), I asked the girls to write a book review to the author. Dr. Renita Schmidt told the girls that she knew Janet Wong, the author, and the girls were excited to have an interaction with the author. I wanted the girls to write about either the most memorable part of the book or what they thought of the book overall. We had had a two-week break between reading the first half of the book and the second half of the book. Sima, Kristen and Kelsie were there the day that we wrote the book reviews.

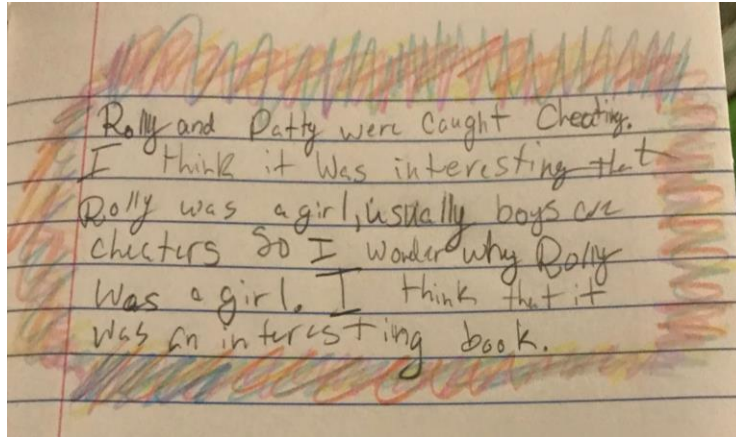


Figure One. Book reviews by Sima

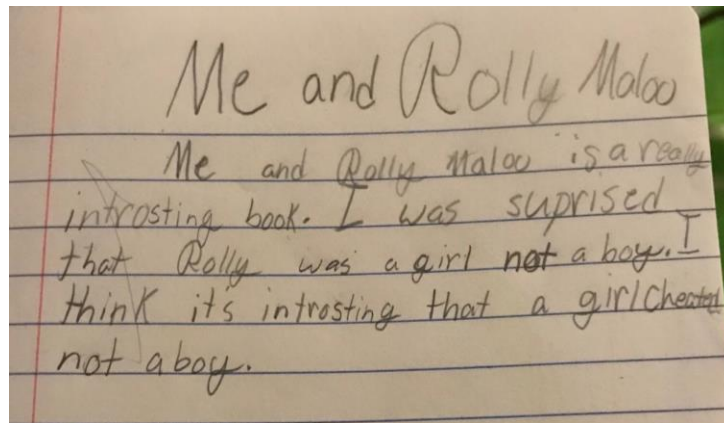


Figure Two. Book review by Kristen

When I read these book reviews, I was not surprised. Kristen had missed the first half of the book and Sima, Kelsie and I spent the first half of this session recounting what happened in the parts Kristen missed. So, I asked the girls, as they reviewed who had cheated, “So do you know anyone who cheats?” and they all said “Boys.” Sima even recounted a specific story of a boy trying to cheat off her.

“He didn’t get caught. I was going to tell the teacher but then I forgot because Tristan and Carlos they were trying to, um, take my math books so they could copy off of it and they were trying to be assassins and I was holding it and one was trying to distract me while one was trying to take it right out of my arms. Spoiler alert: it didn’t work!”

This conversation heated up very quickly. I was shocked to hear the word “assassins” used during Sima’s recounting her experience with cheating. This was also very different than the cheating described in the novel. The boys were trying to physically take the answers from Sima. This must have been an upsetting experience and explains why Sima’s mind went to a harsher descriptor for the boys instead of just cheating classmates. The girls were very ready to talk all about boys and cheating. Every girl had something quite shocking to say.

Kelsie: Also, you know, most of the people that cheat are boys.

Kristen: Why is that?

Sima: Because boys are set up for failure in certain settings.

Kelsie: Totally true.

Sima: Because of technology

Kelsie: They can’t win unless a girl is around.

Me: What do you think that Rolly cheated then, if you think mostly boys cheat.

Kristen: Rolly is a girl?

Me: Rolly is a girl.

Sima: Because Patty was telling her to do that and they wanted to be on the team.

Kelsie: Patty was forcing Rolly to cheat but Rolly didn’t do it but Patty said she would make her popular? I think that’s what she said and Rolly Maloo actually said we better not get caught, we better not.

Even though Rolly is drawn to look like a girl, Kristen was still shocked by the fact that a girl had cheated. In Kristen’s mind, no one cheated except boys. The other girls also seemed to believe that mostly boys are the ones who cheat. They had specific stories from their class of cheating situations. I asked the girls “Do you think that’s interesting that a girl is cheating?”

Kelsie: Yes, that is pretty interesting.

Sima: That's confusing

Kelsie: Some girls that really want to be noticed by guys (looks at Kristen) um,

Kristen: I take offense to that.

Kelsie: No, because she's a girly girl.

Sima: Really, really, really girly girl.

Kristen: I can be a tomboy anytime I want.

Kelsie: She [Kristen] doesn't like boys, she doesn't like being around them.

Kristen: Yeah well they like to pick their boogers.

What I learned from this exchange was that these girls would cheat to gain attention from boys. I also learned that Kristen was considered a girly girl. I really did not feel Kristen would be considered the girly girl of the group, but that was the other girl's classification of her. Kristen felt she could be a tomboy anytime, meaning she recognized that at times she was a girly girl. The conversation continued after the girls shared a laugh about boogers.

Kelsie: Boys are very competitive. Compared to girls (all agree). They don't, they need a girl to be on their because...

Kristen: If they didn't have a girl on their side, they'd be demolished.

Kelsie: We, uh, we don't need a man because we're like girls. We can clean, we can work, we can do whatever we want. But man has like big arms, can't fit through the couch.

Kristen: They can lift the couch.

Sima: We need a forklift.

Kelsie: We only need strength and yeah strength and ourselves. We don't need no man.

Sima and Kristen: We don't need no man!

Kelsie: Do you have a boyfriend?

The conversation had turned back to me. As their small group leader, I was somewhat of an example for them. I revealed that I had a boyfriend. Every single one of the girls looked upset or disappointed with me.

Kelsie: You ruined it!

Me: It's not a bad thing.

All: Yeah it is!

Me: I don't need him.

Sima: He needs you though!

Kelsie: You know why man needs a girl?

Me: Why?

Kelsie: Because they want you to clean stuff and they say stuff like I'm tired from work. I'm going to go to sleep and I don't want anyone to bother me. (others nod in agreement) Those guys frustrate me like sometimes it's like my dad. If he goes to work, he goes to bed. Just sits there. He puts his face down. I don't bother him because he gets angry and he shouts at me.

Sima: But not all men are terrible. There are some men that are really good.

Kristen: There are some men.

There was a recognition in Sima to not generalize an entire population. But the conversation went back to talking about a particular boy in Kelsie's class who was nice to boys but rude to girls. There was a pull back from generalizing, but they still experienced negative treatment from boys their own age. So, I asked what teachers should do when people cheat or are not nice to the girls in my groups.

Sima: Make them stay away from us.

Kelsie: Like, if there is a guy here and he's cheating off a girl. Which happens here, it's true. So, if the teacher caught the boy cheating on her, he should be like separated.

Kristen: Like moved over. Or use these cardboard trays. Ms. Shephard had them! At my old school, they were called the peeker keepers. So, people can't peek on your desk.

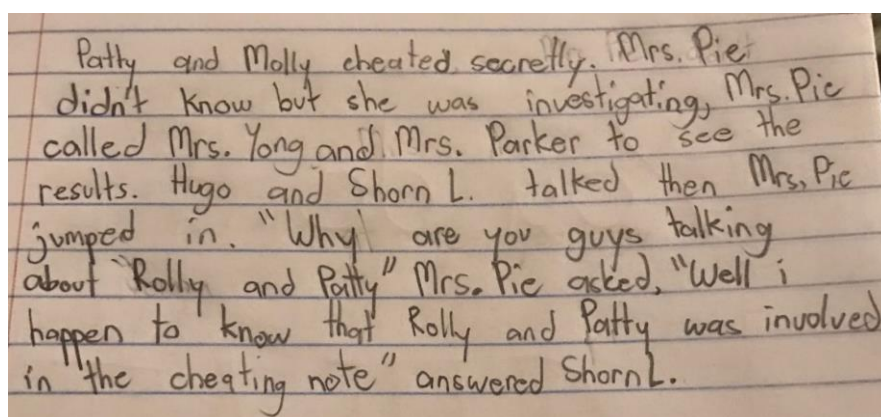
Sima: We use the laptops and you know those blocker things that you use when you take the test to get into the College of Education. Well we use those too. We had those so boys wouldn't cheat on the test.

Kristen: She [Ms. Shepard] mostly gave them to the boys.

Sima: What we know is that the boys actually did worse.

Kristen: Yeah, the girls actually got higher scores than the boys.

They went into conversation about their math tests and we went back to reading Rolly Maloo. I was surprised by what the girls told me. Even though we had main characters that were boys, because the idea of a boy entered this all girl space, the girls were ready to express all their grievances with boys. They had ideas on what teachers should do and noticed how their teacher had treated boys differently than girls.



Patty and Molly cheated secretly. Mrs. Pie didn't know but she was investigating. Mrs. Pie called Mrs. Yong and Mrs. Parker to see the results. Hugo and Shorn L. talked then Mrs. Pie jumped in. "Why are you guys talking about Rolly and Patty?" Mrs. Pie asked. "Well i happen to know that Rolly and Patty was involved in the cheating note" answered Shorn L.

Figure Three. Book review by Kelsie

Kelsie quotes the book here, but this was surprising because during the writing time, we had our books shut and she was trying to quote the book from memory. She had really paid attention. This was the part in *Me and Rolly Maloo* where Shorn L. was revealing the truth about who cheated on the big math test. Shorn L. was proud to have told the truth, and Kelsie liked the idea of showing her pride for being honest. I could tell Kelsie liked this book if she could recall major parts of the book instead of not writing anything at all. Her words were very accurate compared with the text. Even though she was very involved in the conversation about boys and how we discussed cheating, Kelsie's focus was on the story.

Amelia's Boy Survival Guide

For *Amelia's Boy Survival Guide*, I asked the girls to draw a self-portrait. In this



Figure Four. Self-Portrait by Sima

book we discovered that Amelia loved art and art was the one time a day she could truly feel like herself. I wanted to see how the girls saw themselves. I drew one as well, as I did not want to ask the girls to do something I would not do. Every girl was there the day that we drew self-portraits. I emphasized that the girls should draw themselves how they see themselves, that meant they did not have to draw exactly what they looked like, but what they believed they looked like.

Figure 4, is the self-portrait that Sima drew. Sima really wore thick-lensed glasses and a sweater. In her self-portrait, she removed the glasses and drew herself wearing a short sleeved shirt. Sima also does not wear makeup, except on the weekends when her mom knows she will not leave the house. In the self-portrait, however, Sima drew herself with blush on her cheeks. The most intriguing feature of Sima's self-portrait was the crown she drew sitting on top of her head. I never saw her wear a crown and she has not really mentioned an interest in princesses or queens. She drew a very nice pink and black crown on her head. I felt she viewed herself very highly and held herself to high expectations, thus the crown on her head.



Figure Five. Self-Portrait by Layla

In Figure Five, Layla drew her picture very small. She was the tallest girl in our group by about two inches, so I was not sure why she drew herself so small. She also drew herself wearing all pink. Layla never worn all pink during anytime at Strong Girls Book Club so she may wear it outside of the club, but she typically wore neutral or darker colors when I saw her. She also drew her eyes closed with a big smile on her face. This made me happy because sometimes I felt she sometimes was nervous or embarrassed of her reading, so the fact that she saw herself as a happy person pleased me. The part that really surprised me was Layla drawing herself with long, somewhat wavy black hair. Every time I have seen Layla she has been wearing a hijab. The bow in her self-portrait was blue, which was usually the color of the hijab that Layla wore. Overall, she drew a very cute self-portrait, even though it was quite small in her notebook.



Figure Six. Self-Portrait by Kelsie

In Figure Six, we see the self-portrait that Kelsie drew of herself. She drew herself without legs, which may have just been a lack of time, but she clearly took a focus on her upper half. Her shirt looked like one she would wear. It was simple and long sleeved. I noticed she drew a heart on a shirt, possibly an emphasis on love. In the self-portrait, her hair is a light brown, when in actuality she has very dark hair. The most interesting aspect of Kelsie's self-

portrait was the way she drew her face, specifically her eyes. I have never seen Kelsie wear makeup, but she drew herself with dark eyeshadow and a wing accent on the side. I knew Kelsie was very proud of her portrait and turned it around very quickly to show me what she drew.



Figure Seven. Self-Portrait by Kristen

In Figure Seven, we have the last self-portrait from the group: Kristen's. Kristen's portrait was the most accurate to what she looks like in person. Kristen does have long blonde hair. She did not draw any extra make up or accessories that she does not actually wear. She drew the same t-shirt she was wearing that day. It was not completely colored in, but it was a completely pink shirt.

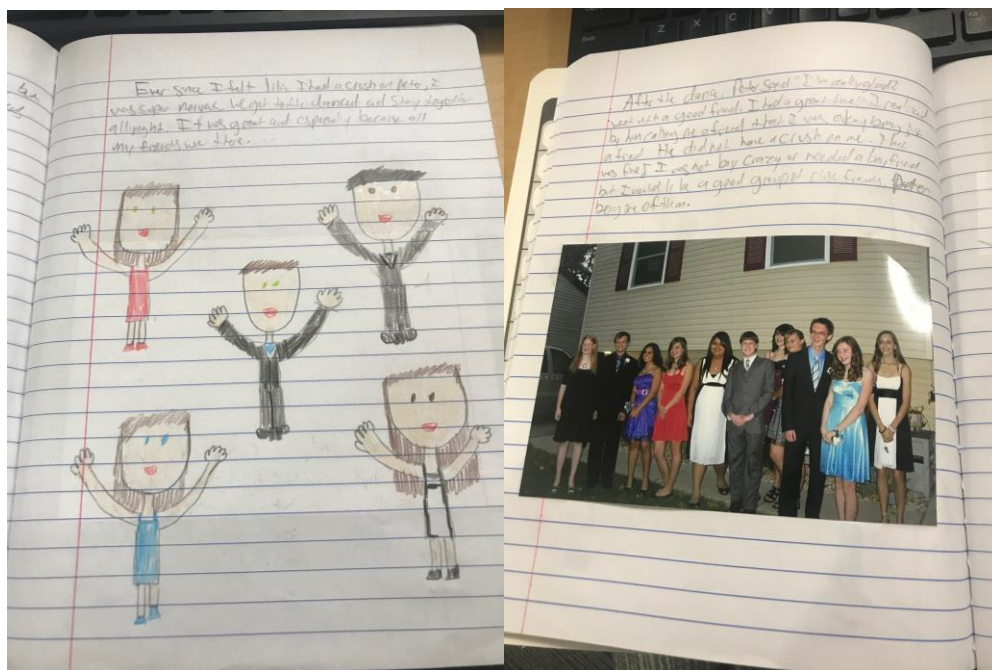
The self-portraits created by the girls support Butler's (1990) claim that gender is not fixed (p. 11). Each girl utilized their individuality to create the ways they saw themselves as young women. Not only that, but Sima specifically recognized herself differently in her self-portrait than how people saw her in person. Again, the notion that gender is not fixed and can be transformed based on situation and mindset is represented in the drawings. I felt their portraits

may have been different if they drew them in a co-ed classroom rather than in a space that embraced being females being proud of becoming strong females.

Amelia's BFF

For *Amelia's BFF*, I figured that since we had read two Amelia books it would be fun for the girls to combine the drawing they had done in their self-portraits with the writing we started during the earlier book review. I began by writing in the style of Amelia's books, which is first person, in a loose-leaf paper notebook of my own, combining words and pictures to describe events in my life. I focused on the first time I was asked to a dance, a similar scenario to *Amelia's Boy Survival Guide*. Then I shared my book with the girls. I told the girls they could write their book on whatever they wanted. Sima and Kelsie wrote an Amelia-style story about events in their lives.

Sharing my book with the girls was a vulnerable process. I am self-conscious about my drawing and handwriting ability. I decided to show the girls my drawings and some pictures from my childhood. I utilized the pictures from my past to help me draw better. I also wanted to show that this was not just a story I created to impress them, but one that was relevant to what we were reading. I wanted to be genuine and let the girls see friends who impacted me in high school. I spent a week putting my story, drawings, and photos together. Figure Eight shows my drawings and how I interpreted my own story of my first high school dance into an Amelia style book. Figure Nine was the photo taken at my first dance to show how I did pull from my life and that these people I drew were my very close friends when I was in 9th grade.



Figures Eight and Nine. My examples of an Amelia-style story

All the girls were given the opportunity to write Amelia style stories, but Kelsie and Sima were the ones who really enjoyed this writing project. Kelsie and Sima each had a week in between the Strong Girls' meetings to write their stories. Kelsie drew more than Sima while Sima focused a lot more on getting the story across with her written words. Both have a boy as a central person in the story. With my book, I tried to weave friends and boys equally, but both the girls' stories focused more on boys.

Kelsie's Story

Figure Ten is the first page of Kelsie's story entitled *My First Crush*. She started her story by explaining some of characters. In Figure Ten, Kelsie described her first crush Thomas, the boy named Phillip who bullied her, and her friend Anya. The context that Kelsie left out was that she grew up in the Philippines. She drew herself, Phillip, and Thomas. A transcription of her writing is below.

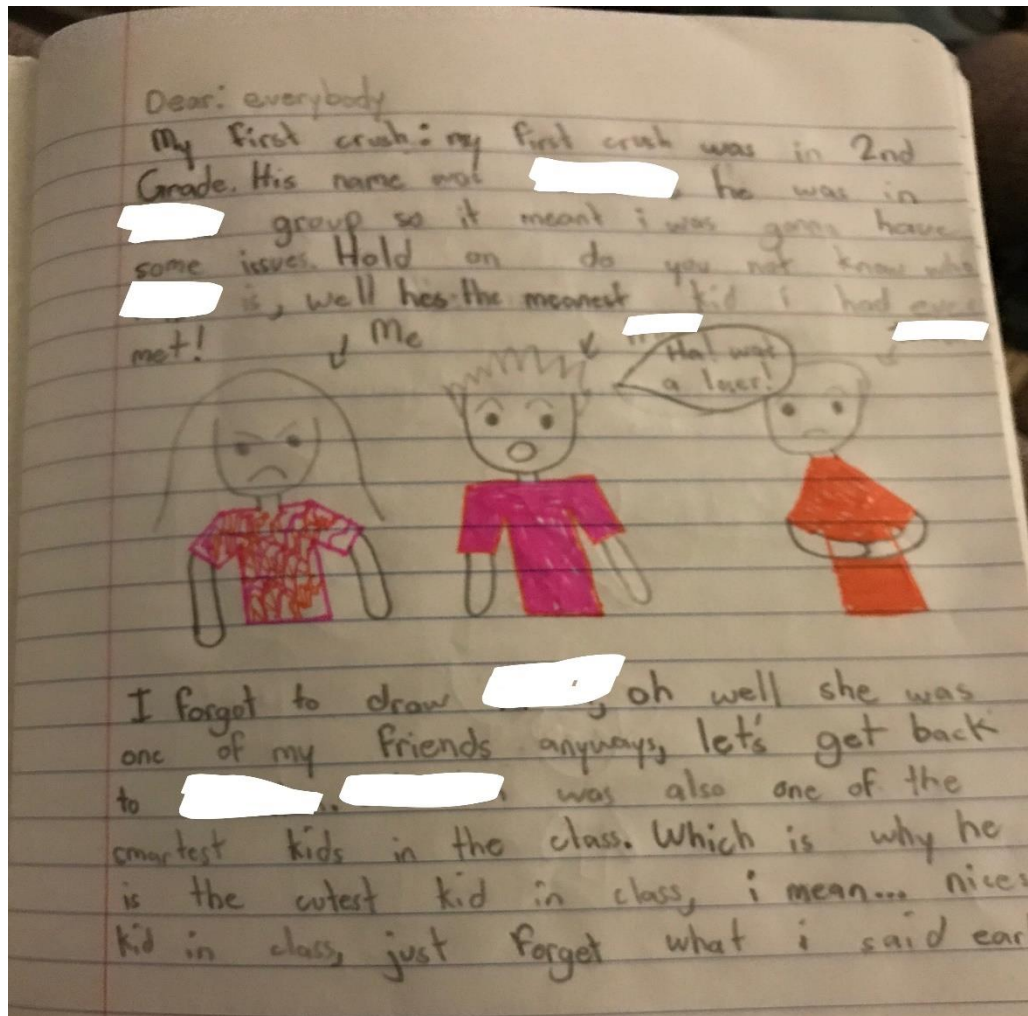


Figure Ten. Story by Kelsie

“My first crush: my first crush was in 2nd Grade. His name was Thomas, he was in Phillip’s group so it meant i was gonna have some issues. Hold on, do you not know who Phillip is, well hes the meanest kid i had ever met!

Phillip: Ha! wat a loser!

I forgot to draw Anya, oh well she was one of my friends anyways, let's get back to Thomas. Thomas was also one of the smartest kids in the class. Which is why he is the cutest kid in class, i mean ... nicest kid in class, just forget what i said earlier."

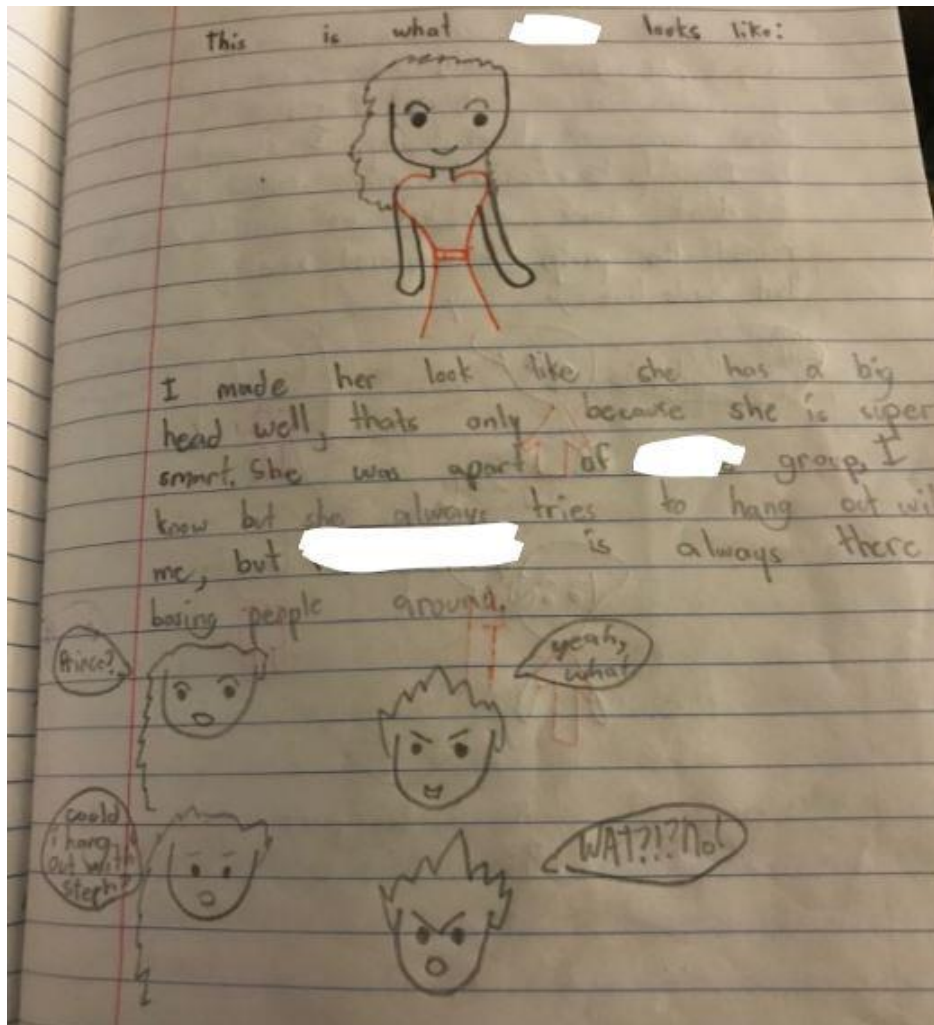


Figure Eleven. Story by Kelsie

In Figure Eleven, she drew Anya. Even though Kelsie liked Anya, Kelsie wrote about how Phillip manipulated Anya's friendship with Kelsie. A transcription of her writing is below.

"This is what Anya looks like: (Refer to Figure Eleven).

I made her look like she has a big head well, thats only because she is super smart. She was a part of Phillip group, I know but she always tries to hang out with me, but Phillip Phillip is always there bosing people around.

Anya: Phillip?

Phillip: yeah, what

Anya: could i hang out with [Kelsie]?

Phillip: WAT?!? No!"

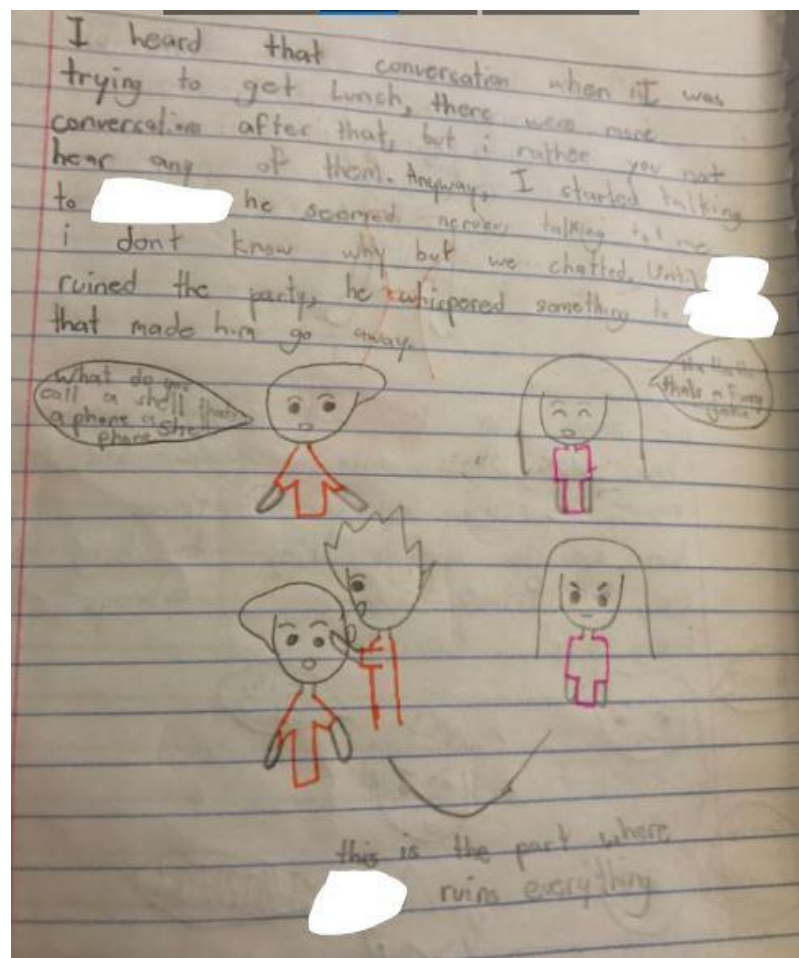


Figure Twelve. Story by Kelsie

In Figure Twelve, Kelsie hinted at more times when Phillip either manipulated her friends or bullied her. Kelsie finally was able to talk to Thomas alone, but Phillip interjected and somehow pulled Thomas away. A transcription of her writing is below.

“I heard that conversation when I was trying to get Lunch, there were more conversations after that, but i rather you not hear any of them. Anyway, I started talking to Thomas he seemed nervous talking to me i dont know why but we chatted. Until Phillip ruined the party, he whispered something to Thomas that made him go away.

Thomas: what do you call a shell thats a phone a shell phone

Kelsie: Ha Ha Ha thats a funny joke

this is the part where Phillip ruins everything [Refer to Figure Twelve].”

After that one incident with Thomas and Phillip, Kelsie jumped a year ahead in Figure Thirteen. Instead of talking about someone she had a crush on, she brought up Johnny, someone who had a crush on her. She talked about how she handled someone having a crush on her. A transcription of her writing is below.

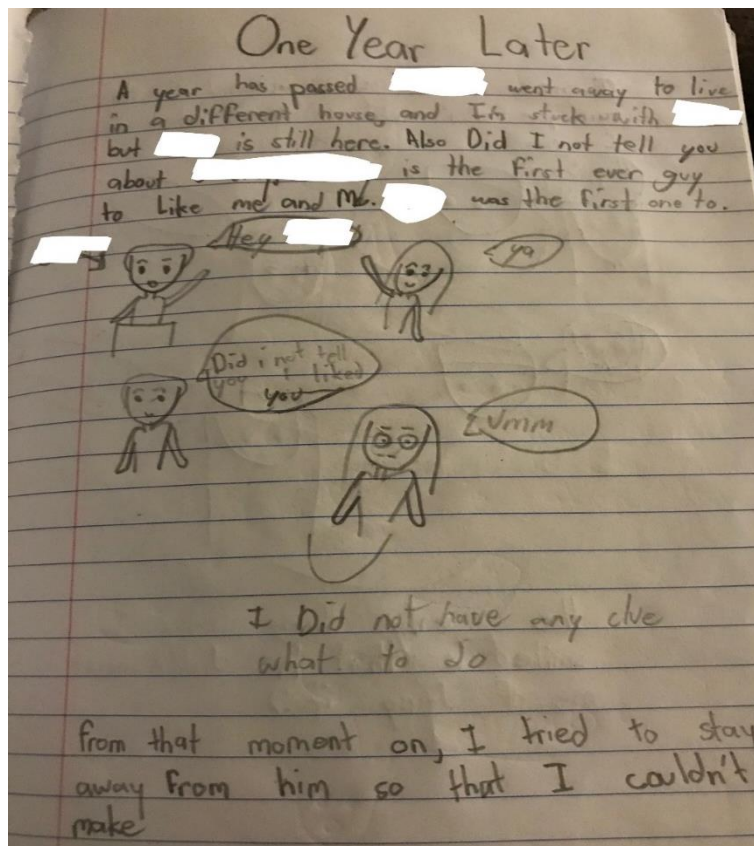


Figure Thirteen. Story by Kelsie

“One Year Later. A year has passed Thomas went away to live in a different house, and I’m stuck with Phillip but Anya is still here. Also Did I not tell you about Johnny, Johnny is the first ever guy to Like me and Ms. Aurora was the first one to.

Johnny: Hey [Kelsie]!

Kelsie: ya

Johnny: Did i not tell you I liked you

Kelsie: umm

I did not have any clue what to do from that moment on, I tried to stay away from him so that i couldn't make."

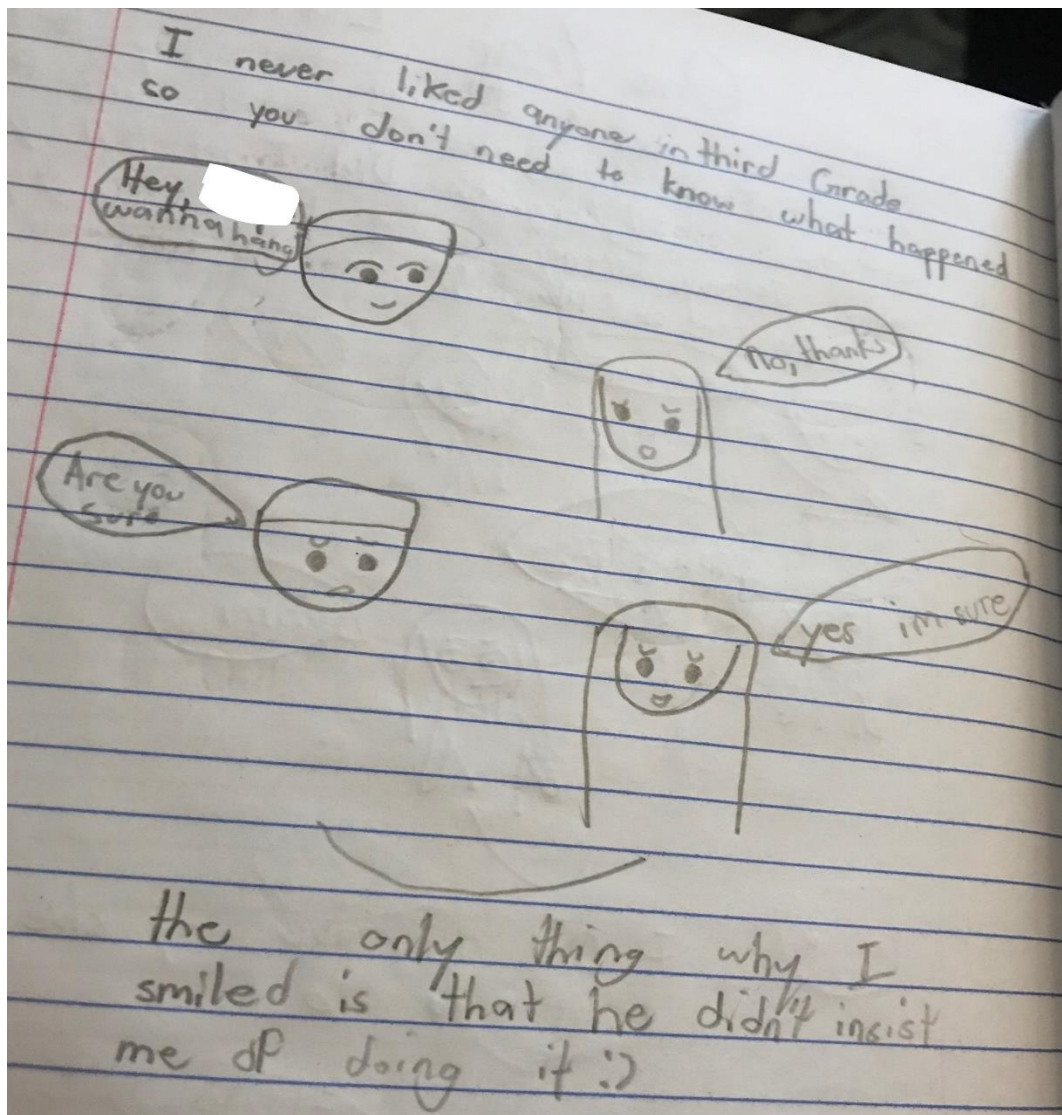


Figure Fourteen. Story by Kelsie

In Figure Fourteen, Kelsie continued to talk about her third-grade crush experiences. A transcription of her writing is below.

"I never liked anyone in third Grade so you don't need to know what happened

Person [Refer to Figure 14]: Hey [Kelsie] wanna hang

Kelsie: no, thanks

Person [Refer to Figure 14]: Are you sure

Kelsie: yes im sure the only thing why I smiled is that he didn't insist me of doing it :)"

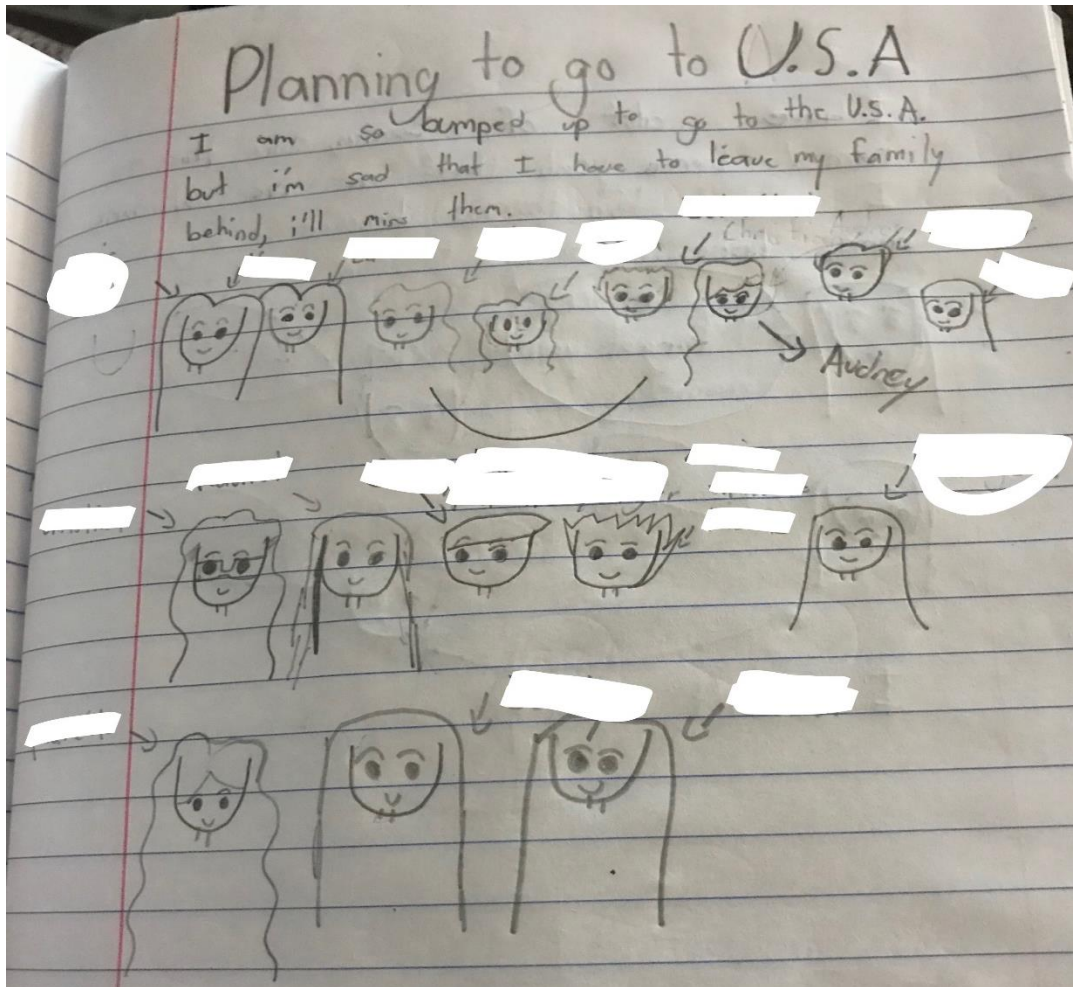


Figure Fifteen. Story by Kelsie

In Figure Fifteen is when Kelsie reveals she is not from the US originally. She constantly talked about her big family when we were in the small group and she listed members of her family. A transcription of her writing is below.

“Planning to go to U.S.A. I am so bumped up to go to the U.S.A. but i’m sad that I have to leave my family behind, i’ll miss them.

Kelsie goes on to list the names of her extended family

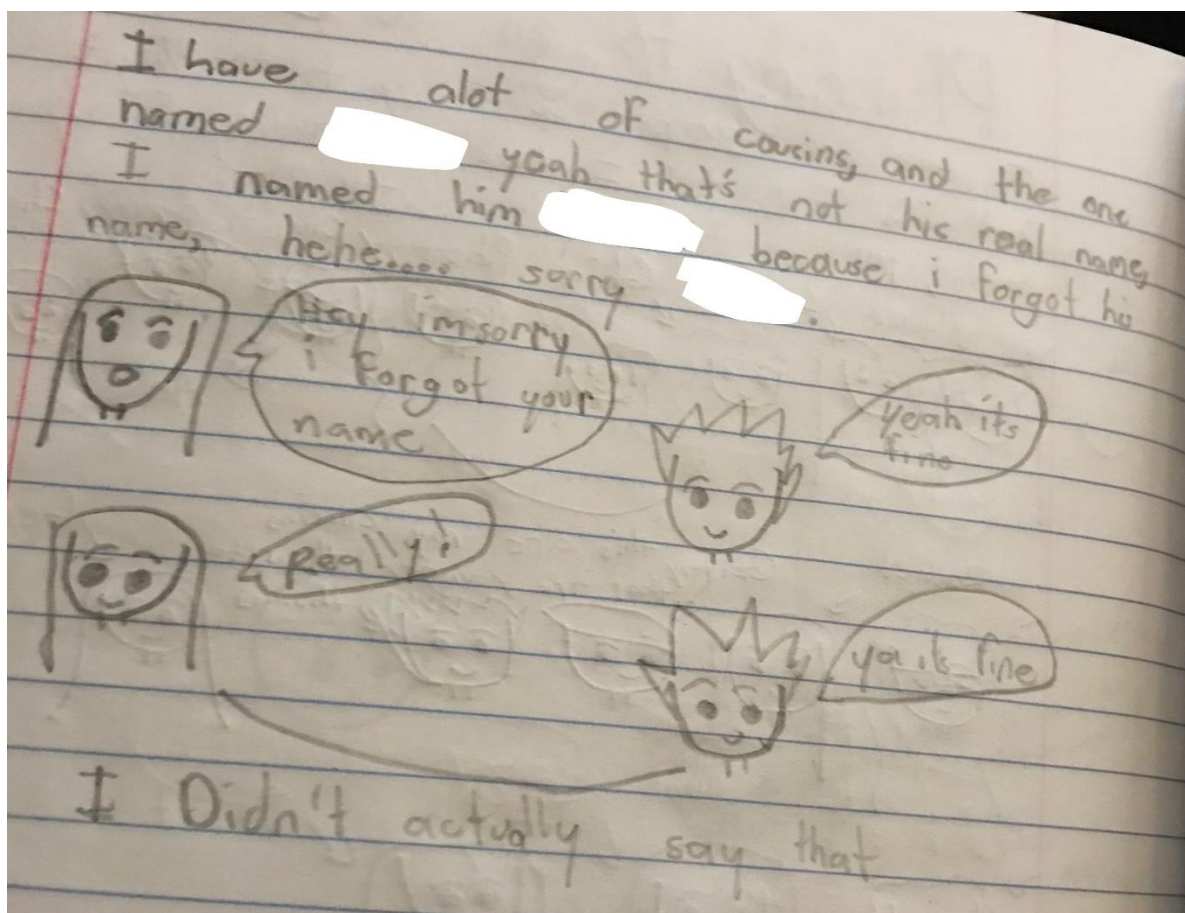


Figure Sixteen. Story by Kelsie

In Figure Sixteen, Kelsie further talks about her family and how she sometimes forgets their names. A transcription of her writing is below.

"I have alot of cousins, and the one named tommy yeah that's not his real name, I named him tommy because i forgot his name, hehe Sorry tommy.

Kelsie: Hey im sorry i forgot your name

Tommy: yeah its fine

Kelsie: Really!

Tommy: your fine

I Didn't actually say that."

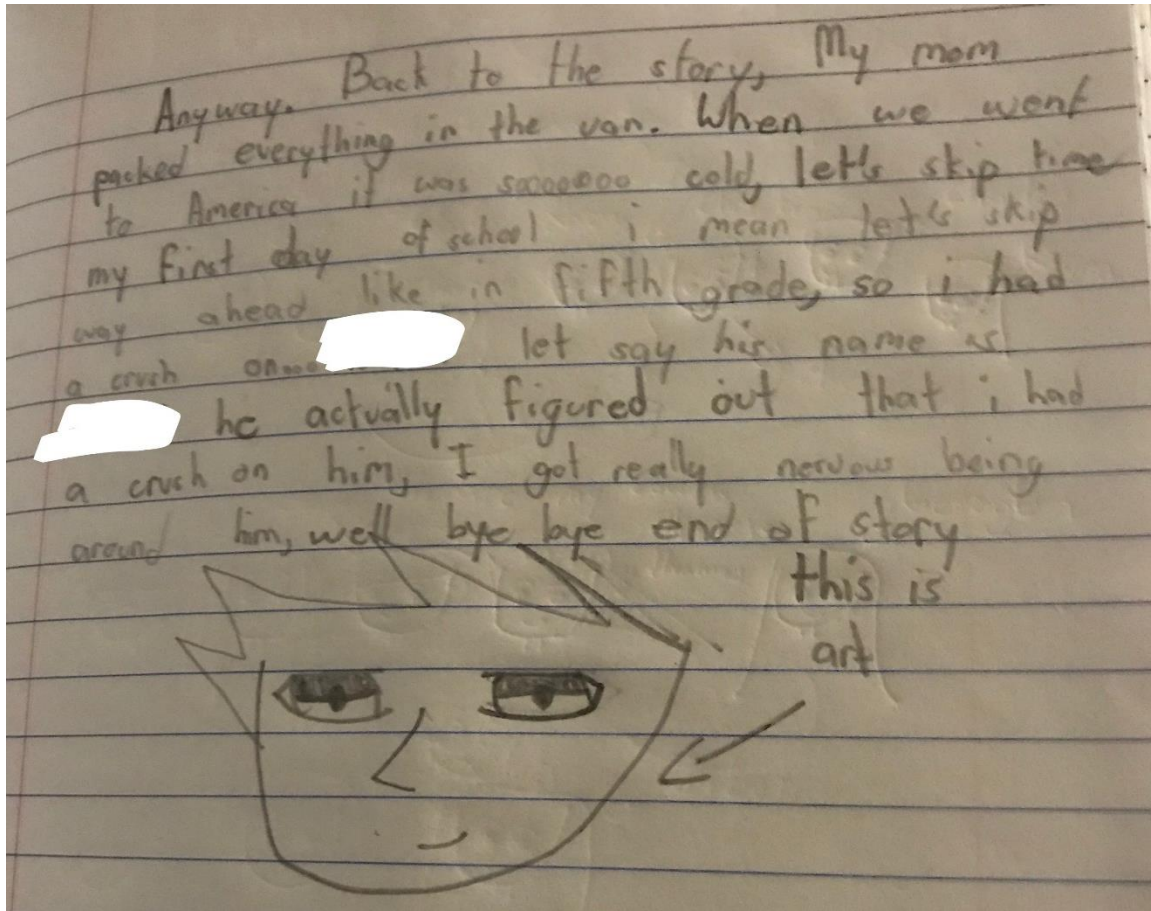


Figure Seventeen. Story by Kelsie

Figure Seventeen is the last page of the story I have from Kelsie. She brought it to present day by using a pseudonym for her current crush Rollo. A transcription of her writing is below.

"Anyway. Back to the story, my mom packed everything in the van. When we went to America it was soooooooo cold, let's skip time my first day of school i mean let's skip way ahead like in fifth grade, so i had a crush on... Rollo let say hi name is Rollo he actually figured out that i had a crush on him, I got really nervous being around him, well bye bye end of story.

this is art [Refer to Figure Seventeen]. The End."

Kelsie's style is very much like the Amelia books we have read. She combined pictures, writing, and a style that read like she was speaking the story.

Sima's Story

Sima's story is entitled *Stuck in between the triple trilogy*. Figure Eighteen is the first page of her story. A transcription of her writing is below.

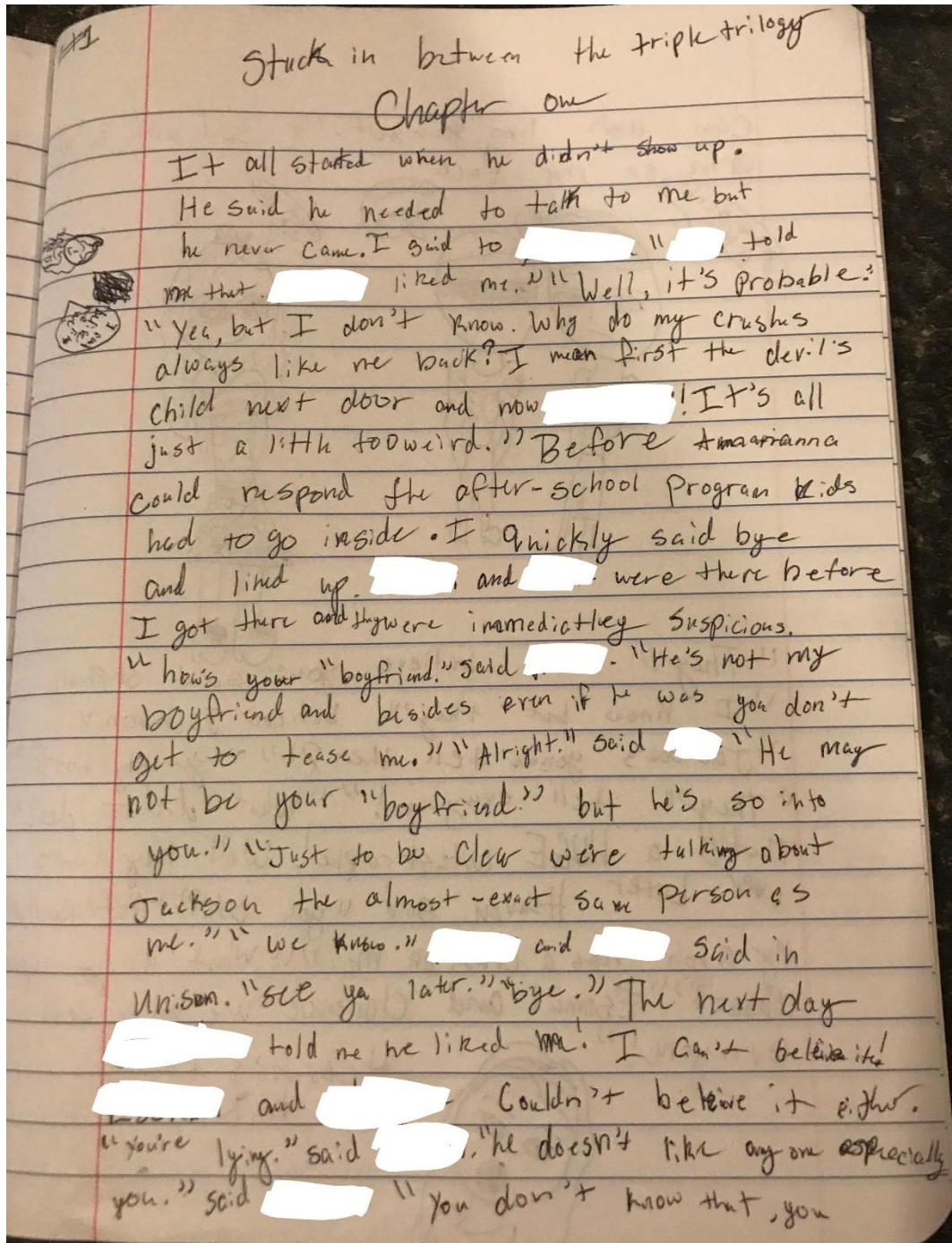


Figure Eighteen. Story by Sima

“Stuck in between the triple trilogy.

Chapter one.

It all started when he didn't show up. He said he needed to talk to me but he never came. I said to Aquamarine “Jones told me that Ronaldo liked me”

“Well, it's probable.”

“Yes, but I don't know. Why do my crushes always like me back? I mean first the devil's child next door and now RONALDO! It's all just a little too weird.”

Before Aquamarine could respond the after-school program kids had to go inside. I quickly said bye and lined up. Rachel and Layla were there before I got there and they were immediately suspicious. “how's your “boyfriend.” said Rachel.

“He's not my boyfriend and besides even if he was you don't get to tease me.”

“Alright.” said Layla “He may not be your “boyfriend” but he's so into you.”

“Just to be clear, we're talking about Ronaldo the almost-exact same person as me.”

“We know.” Rachel and Layla said in unison. “See ya later.”

“bye.”

The next day Ronaldo told me he liked me! I can't believe it! Ernie and Carlos couldn't believe it either. “you're lying.” said Ernie.

“he doesn't like anyone especially you.” said Carlos.

“you don't know that, you”

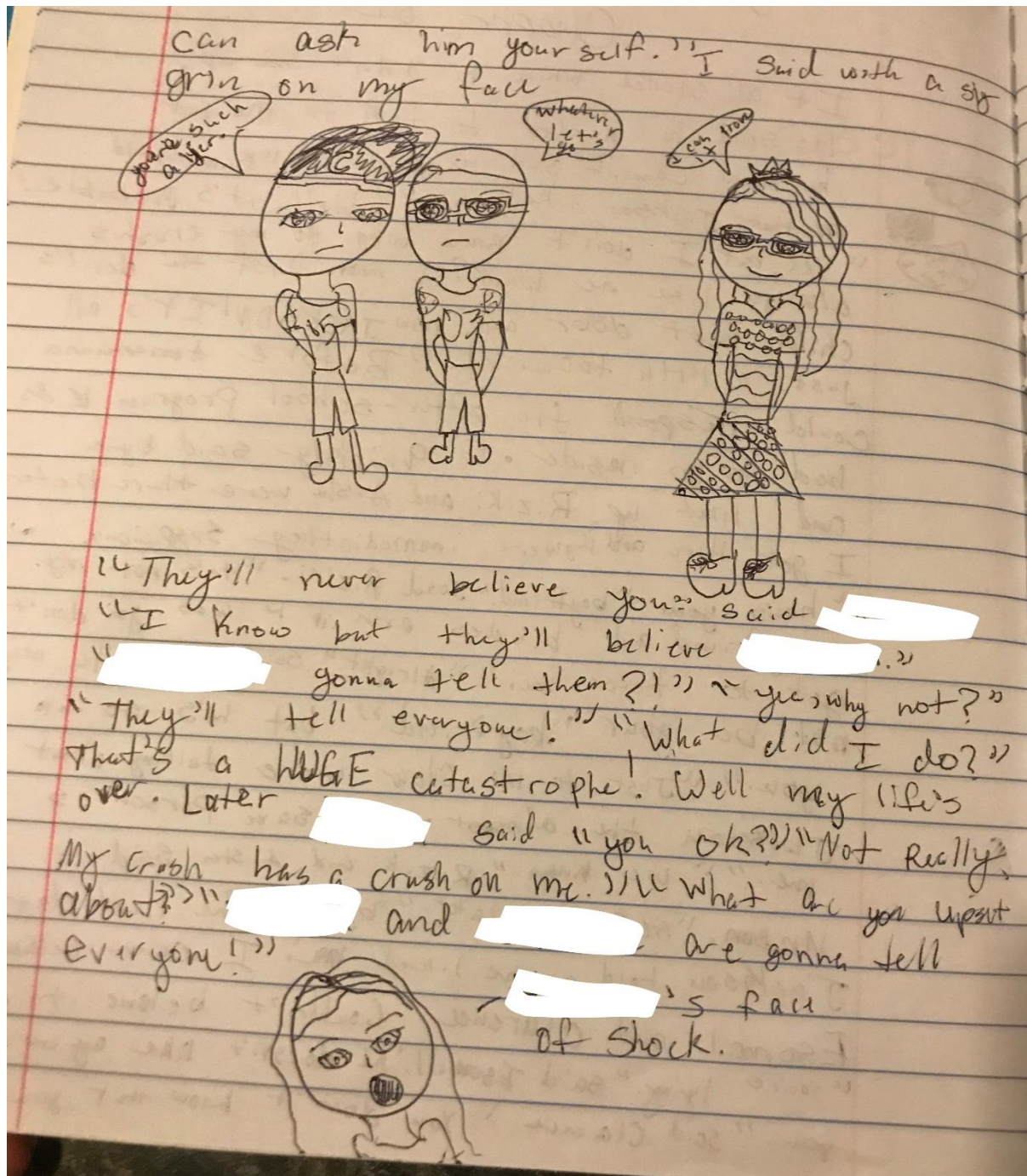


Figure Nineteen. Story by Sima

Figure Nineteen shows the first drawings of herself and the others in her story. She picked up mid-sentence from the first page. A transcription of her writing is below.

"can ask him yourself." I said with a sly grin on my face.

#15 jersey [Refer to image 19]: yoare such a liar.”

#03 jersey [Refer to image 19]: whatever let’s go

Sima: I can prove it

“They’ll never believe you.” said Kelsie

“I know but they’ll believe Ronaldo.”

“Ronaldo’s gonna tell them?”

“Yea, why not?”

“They’ll tell everyone!”

“What did I do?”

That’s a HUGE catastrophe! Well my life’s over. Later Kristen said “you ok?”

“Not really. My crush has a crush on me.”

“What are you upset about?”

“Ernie and Carlos are gonna tell everyone!”

[Refer to Figure 19] Kristen’s face of shock.”

Sima’s style focused a lot more on the writing than the drawing. However, the few drawings she had clearly show that she took a lot of care in her drawing even though there were not many.

If I had not created my own version of this expressive assignment, I feel I would not have gotten any of the girls to participate. This assignment took a lot of effort. The examples I share here draw on Rosenblatt’s (1995) transactional and aesthetic reading. This project shows the students doing more than reading the text, but working with the text to be inspired to create their own work. To complete the assignment, the girls had to not just act upon the Amelia book, but use the Amelia book to create their own story. This was not just interacting with the book, but

transaction. As shown, Kelsie's and Sima's stories were quite different, allowing each girl to respond and express themselves in their own way. This was an example of aesthetic reading and responding because the girls were inspired by the text to create their own expression of how they relate to the book in their own lives. The girls had to address their feelings with the book and reconcile how they would present their own experiences. This was beyond a summary or simply reading pages in the texts presented, but more about taking what they had read and expressing themselves in a new style that combined drawing and writing.

Findings

Male figures were never present and rarely emphasized in texts read in the Strong Girls Book Club. As soon as Kristen thought Rolly was a boy and it got such a reaction from all the other girls, I knew that gender was ingrained in their lives and I had to explore how that impacted their reading. This study shows that children as young as fifth grade, most likely younger, are very aware of their gender and have specific ideas about what that means. They are aware of the binary that exists, aware that the ways they view themselves are not how others view them, and that gender is definitely a social construct in their everyday lives. Each session brought discussion of either crushes or fathers even though the focus of every story was a girl.

This discussion of gender gave girls the freedom to explore and define their own gender beyond what they felt was socially acceptable in school. Sima, Kristen, Layla, and Kelsie all identified as female. They embraced their girlhood and felt they were strong against any obstacle thrown at them. Layla made a very strong decision to join a more outdoorsy club at school. Kristen and Sima constantly support each other through crushes and classes. Kelsie was never afraid to speak her mind. Each one of these girls believed she was strong. Even when male

figures were brought into conversation, the topic always came back to staying strong and sticking up for what was right.

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations with this study was my lack of experience with classroom management regarding elementary aged children. I am a history major obtaining my social studies endorsement. Nothing prepared me to manage a small group of girls 9-10 years old. I had to watch my peers and learn how to connect with the girls. It was extremely difficult at first to connect with the girls and with a project reliant on conversation and rapport with the girls, I had to adjust. I feel I could have connected on a deeper level with the girls by sharing more about myself earlier. When I began to talk more about myself, the girls began to share more information with me as well and revealed more about their lives.

However, this was another limitation. While the girls were willing to share some part of their lives, I was an adult/teacher figure. They would hint at aspects of their lives: their crushes, their friends, and their family. But not story was every completed. They would use code names for crushes or say someone's name and when I would ask more, they would somewhat shut down. Something else I had to consider was the trauma some of the girls had experienced earlier in their lives. Layla was a refugee and most likely saw very traumatic situations in the refugee camp where she spent many of her formative years. Being together only two hours every week does not allow one to create the same connections an everyday teacher can. That does not mean not to try because if you can show up every day and attempt to make a connection. You can make connections, I was just not expecting so many deep conversations.

Implications for the future

As Strong Girls continues, I think it would be interesting for the book club to more completely address gender. Books we have read that are not included in this thesis were *Lumberjanes: Beware of the Kitten Holy* by Shannon Watters and *George* by Alex Gino. *Lumberjanes* has undertones of a same sex relationship and *George* follows the story of a young transgender individual. These books push gender boundaries. In the future I would, before having the girls in the small groups or as a large group, have discussions about what each girl knows about gender in general. Some girls may know more while some may just only know the binary. By having conversations about gender and exploring different possibilities, girls can really explore what gender means to them.

Conclusion

Being a part of the Strong Girls Read Strong Books Book Club was one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my pre-service teaching period. This experience pushed me to really learn how to connect with students no matter what age. I had to become comfortable with the uncomfortable feeling of being vulnerable. In return, I saw the girls reveal more about themselves and how they felt about themselves as young women. As we read multiple texts, we discussed home life, boys, and how they saw themselves. I learned the importance of being genuine and honest with your students and the possibilities for fruitful conversations.

What was unique about this study is we brought boys, through book characters and book topics, into an all-girl space. It brought forth conversations that showed ways the girls transacted with the texts, expressed their opinions through drawing and writing, and interacted with the modern world constantly changing around them. I feel some people have a misconception that

children are not aware of what goes on beyond what people directly tell them. Children pick up on the whispered conversations and glimpse of what they see on TV. The girls are aware not only of their own gender, but also of how they interact with people of other genders and the opposite sex. Gender is present whether explicitly in texts about gender or more subtly in everyday conversations and popular culture. Discussions of gender can happen in any place and I should have expected conversations about boys even though our sessions focused on being strong girls. When teachers try to be open with students and prepared to enter unexpected conversations, they will learn that being strong is about addressing the uncomfortable, pushing boundaries, and embracing the unusual.

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